

## BRIAN JUNGWIWATTANAPORN

### *ASIAN/AMERICAN*

Uncomfortable silences follow questions on where I'm from, where I live, and which country or culture I feel a greater affinity for as I think through, yet again, how to reply. Sitting in exams during high school I would shade and erase the bubbles asking about ethnicity. I remember wishing for a simple classification, an identity I could mark. Before I began casually checking "other" on the various forms and documents life presents one with, I was in ethnographic fact an Asian-American. But I have credible claim on several other identifiers, some adopted, others imposed: Asian, American, the hyphenated grandeur of Asian-American, third culture kid, dual citizen, yellow, white, not really an American, the smudged AmerAsian.

People rarely realize that there are in fact two types of Asian-Americans. While you may think there are many more that fall under this umbrella as images of Chinese-, Indian-, Vietnamese-, Korean-, Pakistani- and so on Americans fill your head, from where I and the others like me sit, there are only two. There are Americans of Asian descent or of recent immigration who have parents of the same ethnicity, and then there are Asian-Americans of mixed parentage and dual nationality. While the former may use any of the charming hyphenated titles above, children of parents with differing nationalities end up with something that sounds like something less: the dreaded "half."

As half-American, half-something else we have different challenges. The first type of Asian-Americans have cultural markers for their identities. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* or Jhumpa Lahiri's books trace the conflict of being in one culture with roots in another and coming to terms with both. But within either culture, they have access and outlet to another, so they can be both, fully Asian and fully American. Being half this and half that, however, is the denial of something full. This is not to deny the assimilation challenges of American children with Asian parents, but at least they have their own books.

Growing up in Boca Raton, Florida, the world was a bubble. Learning later that it was an affluent area surprised me. As a child everything seemed normal, and I very much thought of myself as an American. I believed in our myths, knew our states and capitols, and cheered our teams in the Olympics. It never really occurred to me that I might be something else despite other children laughing and pointing, pulling the corner of their eyes, distorting them as they narrowed. As a child being an American in my community was playing baseball, speaking English, eating apple pie, and celebrating the Fourth of July. My family ate rice every day, an American mother's small concession to an Asian father. It never struck me as different. I thought everyone ate rice. The neighborhood agreed that the foreigners here were our Spanish-speaking Bolivian neighbors. Maybe it was Roberto's black hair and slightly darker skin, or just proximity, sharing our yards, but we got along with each other better than with the other kids. We never felt different though; we were always invited to the neighborhood's reindeer games. I never felt too out of place; like many children I didn't know things could be different.

I took my first trip to Thailand at the age of ten, and moved there when I was twelve. While our home in Florida was a rest stop for travelling Thais when I was a boy, going to Thailand was the first time I felt different. I felt both more American and less: I learned that my identity was flexible, a choice. Attending one of the few international schools in Bangkok, I was confronted with several emotions. I felt the boundaries that marked me as an American more surely. Living in Thailand, the land of my father's family, I also desired familiarity with it and with them. I wanted to learn about myself in a way I had lacked access to before.

Growing up away from the United States, my perspectives changed. Although I was still immersed in U.S. history, cheered U.S. sports teams, and returned for a short visit every year, I could feel a gap between myself and other American children. Reading the paper, watching news from the BBC, NHK, Deutsche Welle, and reading the local English dailies I saw my home, the United States, from the outside for the first time. It looked different. Having sold our house, we no longer had a base to return to in the U.S. We began to regard a trip to the U.S. as going home, no matter where we were headed. We no longer claimed a regional American identity, lumping the coasts together with the middle, telling strangers we were from "America" but unable to say where exactly. Living abroad facilitated this distancing while confirming a sense of place. I was an American from nowhere in particular.